

Henry A. Waxman

24th District, California

May 29, 1987

JUDIASM AND POLICAL LIBERALISM NOT INCOMPATABLE

I have known for some time that my friend Dennis Prager is both a political conservative and a committed Jew. Still, I was shocked to read in the Jewish Journal that Prager has a version of liberalism which he cannot reconcile with Jewish moral values.

As carefully as I read Prager's essay, I could not recognize the liberal beliefs to which he objects as beliefs I hold or beliefs that are held by most other Jewish liberals. I believe I should be something of an authority on this matter. During my nearly 20 years as a public official I have been proud to be politically liberal and a committed Jew. Furthermore, I count among my closest colleagues all the Jewish liberals in Congress and virtually all the Jewish liberals who hold office in California.

Prager summarizes the liberal position on the crucial issue of abortions as "killing unborn children because two people chose not to use any birth control devices." First of all, Prager knows perfectly well that a fetus is not a child in halacha or American law. The constant reference to fetuses as "babies" or "children"

those of us who favor freedom of choice on abortion approve of abortion. The opposite is the case. We liberals in Congress along with public health officers and groups such as Planned Parenthood want to reduce the number of abortions. We propose to do this by vastly improving the communication of information on contraception to people of all ages, both married and single.

Ironically, the blame for many abortions rests with the same conservative elements with whom Prager feels so comfortable. The abysmal ignorance of sexually active teenagers about human sexuality is largely the fault of conservatives. Christian conservatives have kept meaningful sex education out of the schools. They have kept family planning clinics few in number and often inaccessible to teenagers lacking parental consent. Even now, these same conservatives are battling against my legislation to continue funding the family planning program. If they succeed, the only result I can see is more unintended pregnancies, and more abortions.

The landmark Wade v. Rowe decision that we liberals support set down rules for abortion based on the Constitutional right to privacy. I know of no one who supports this ruling because he or she favors abortions as a method of birth control! The central issue is whether the government in Washington should dictate that in all circumstances, even when the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest or ~~which its continuation may harm the mother~~ the child would be born grossly deformed, the mother, father and their ethical ~~advisors~~ and medical advisors should be precluded from exercising their judgment.

On the issue of "anti-communism" I am equally dumbfounded. Every single liberal Jew whom I know regards communism as a great evil. Perhaps a generation ago there were "fellow travellers" who were "soft on communism." One does not find such people today among Jewish liberals in public office, journalism, or academia.

If we are anti-communists, Prager muses, why are we not involved in the overthrow of the Sandinistas? We simply do not advocate military action to depose a government unless we see a moral alternative clearly superior to allowing that government to remain in power. One need not be the slightest bit soft on communism to recoil in revulsion from the thought of a contra government run by thugs from the Samocista National Police *in Nicaragua.*

Some of us worry that aid to these contras (or "freedom fighters" as President Reagan has called them) would have to be followed by an American troop commitment after their inevitable failure militarily. Is this the place for Americans to go to war? Wars are easier to start than to end. This one would be grossly misconceived.

Incredibly, Prager blames the liberal (I would call it the Constitutional) position on separation of church and state for endangering Christianity and other religions in America. He flatly labels the American Jewish Congress' strong position on

separation of church and state as part of an "anti-religious agenda." Surely, a man of Dennis Prager's sophistication does not believe that the fate of religion in America will be determined by whether or not there is a prayerful moment of silence in the schools or a creche in the town square. In a pluralistic society, separation of church and state, will assure religious freedom and prevent one religious group from imposing its religion or morality on another. Have Jews, as a minority, ever fared well in any nation where the majority religion controlled the government as well? Is it not true that wherever Christian belief is most intense and universal the Jews have fared the worst? Was there ever a nation more piously Christian than pre-World War II Poland? Was there any people which collaborated in the destruction of European Jewry with greater zest than the pious Polish Catholics? Is it not the case that the Bible Belt in America where fundamentalist Protestantism is so strong has also been the area of greatest anti-Semitism?

Finally, on the question of the role of women, I am again baffled at Prager's charge. Contrary to Prager, there is no official liberal line on the roles of the sexes. No one is excommunicated from the liberal community for failing to belong to the National Organization of Women or, for that matter, for maintaining an "old fashioned" family in which the "woman of the house" is primarily involved in child rearing and home-making.

What we liberals are concerned about -- as on the abortion issue -- is freedom of choice. The Equal Rights Amendment does not seek to compel men or women to do anything. It seeks to create equality of opportunity.

It is interesting to note that Prager's views are to be found almost exclusively among a small group of the intelligencia, ~~who~~ <sup>who</sup> spend a great deal of time talking to each other in the pages of Commentary Magazine. Outside these circles, support for the views of liberal Democrats remains exceedingly strong. Jewish voters continue to vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. Jewish officeholders are overwhelmingly politically liberal, ~~Democrats~~. Apparently, the liberalism to which most American Jews respond so positively is substantially different from the caricature of liberalism which Prager swiftly sketches and then rejects. We are committed to the values of equal opportunity and social justice. We see the government which represents us all, as a vehicle to help people receive an education, health care and protection from those forces in an unbridled competitive market place that would take advantage of ~~them~~ <sup>us</sup>. Compassion is not a value to hide from, but one our Jewish heritage would have us prove.